

Some churchgoers welcome the hug: Passing the peace

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Fellowship time during the early Sunday service at Morning Star Baptist Church in Cleveland brings smiles to worshipers' faces from the moment they are told to "hug one another this morning; show some love."

For several minutes, men and women, young and old, move about the sanctuary and embrace. No matter whether you are a first-time visitor or a longtime member, you are hugged. Before the service resumes, an older woman tells a young man: "Give me a kiss. I didn't get my hug."

From Morning Star Baptist Church to New Life Episcopal Church in Uniontown to Euclid Lutheran Church, a whole lot of hugging is going on at religious services— at least across northeast Ohio.

A practice that once was more common in Pentecostal and black and Latino churches has moved into the mainstream as churchgoers find that hugging both meets a basic human need and builds a stronger sense of community in their congregations. Not all churches favor hugging—shaking hands is still the norm in most Catholic parishes—but the practice is gaining in popularity.

Margaret Paloma, a sociologist at the University of Akron, said that the church provides a safe place for human contact in a society in which more people are living and playing alone, and that the culture "is almost sterile" with regard to touch, unless the subject is sex. "It's part of a need we have as human beings, and it isn't easily satisfied in our culture," she said.

Some church advocates for hugging say it follows the example of Jesus, who embraced disciples and healed people with his touch, according to the Gospels.

"Jesus touched people in every single way imaginable," said Patricia Hanen, assistant to the bishop for congregational development for the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio. "We're all in America operating out of a hug deficit," she said.

As the Pentecostal and charismatic movements continue to grow, their influence is particularly welcome today when concerns about sexual abuse and harassment have further limited casual hugs, said Paloma, widely regarded as an expert on the Assemblies of God and other Pentecostal churches.

Earl Preston Jr., pastor of Morning Star Baptist, remembers a man coming to him in tears after a service, saying, "I haven't had a hug in I don't know when." Preston, who hugs everyone after the second service at Morning Star, tries to keep in mind that the only hug a person may receive in a week is in church. "How can we love if we don't touch?"

The bottom line in many mainline churches is that once people try hugging, they like it.

Deaconess Judy Hoshek, an assistant to the bishop for congregational life for the Northeastern Ohio Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, said she has watched the "passing of the peace" go from people nodding to one another and perhaps extending their hands, to up to five or six minutes of congregants moving through the church embracing one another.

She remembers one older woman telling her, "I live alone, and I love it when somebody passes the peace and gives me a hug."

Similarly, Hanen said, churches in the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio have been "working on robust passing of the peace for the last 25 years." Today, once the passing of the peace begins, "what you have trouble with is getting them to stop," she said.

Not everyone is comfortable with hugging, and church leaders emphasize that it is important to respect the wishes of those who do not want to be hugged. Some people prefer to shake hands or to hug only people of the same sex or of similar age.

Clergy say it is important to set boundaries to prevent abuses. Passing the sign of peace is not a group grope or an occasion for an older man to embrace young women. Hanen and Paloma said inappropriate touch should be addressed immediately.

If such ground rules are adhered to, however, religious communities can be a place for healthy, affirming touch, church leaders said. -David Briggs, *Religion News Service*